Satisfaction Guaranteed: Techno-Orientalism in Vaporwave

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ABSTRACT   A characteristic frequently glossed over in scholarly examinations of the online electronic music genre vaporwave is its use of East Asian cultural imagery in its paratexts. One exception is a piece by musicologist Ken McLeod, who connects vaporwave's use of visual references to Japanese culture to techno-Orientalism, a term that describes how paranoia around Japanese economic expansion in the late twentieth century manifested in American and European cultural products. This article extends McLeod's argument to show how the uses and reproductions of East Asian cultural elements in vaporwave serve to reinforce stereotypes consistent with histories of techno-Orientalist representations, particularly with regard to gender. This article elaborates on the anonymous nature of the vaporwave scene to complicate approaches to techno-Orientalist analyses of digital artifacts. In doing so, this essay contributes to the growing body of scholarly literature addressing the roles representation, aesthetics, and affect play in the formation of communities around music genres online.

KEYWORDS   <u>gender</u>, <u>music</u>, <u>nostalgia</u>, <u>vaporwave</u>, <u>techno-Orientalism</u>, <u>pleasure</u>

[Editors' note: Accompanying this article is a <u>playlist < https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0F64CXGBfYRUZ6URQnOYMSEhXGmr3VhZ></u> that provides multimedia context with the article. You are invited to watch/listen while reading.]

In December 2012, musicologist and critic Adam Harper published an article in the online music criticism magazine *Dummy* titled "Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza," in which he emphasizes the contradictory role of this newer genre of electronic music in relation to corporate-sponsored globalization. Is vaporwave "a critique of capitalism or a capitulation to it?" Harper asks. His answer: "Both and neither."[1] Posts on the subreddit r/vaporwave, the most active subforum on Reddit dedicated to the genre, point to the continued influence of this essay. One user asked "Is 'capitalist dystopia' really a vaporwave theme or was this just a figment of Adam Harper's imagination?" The question led to a rich discussion in the comments section on the merits and drawbacks of this interpretation of vaporwave's cultural moment.[2] Despite the continued influence of

vaporwave on popular music trends, other critical aspects of the genre have neglected to receive the same attention from vaporwave fans and observers.

One aspect of vaporwave that is glossed over in the literature on the genre is the East Asian (primarily Japanese, but including Korean and Chinese) cultural imagery and text that saturates this music. Despite the frequency of these elements in vaporwave's paratexts (what Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth describe as "the maelstrom of online images, GIFs, videos, and interactive media that constitute vaporwave's 'interface aesthetic'"[3]) the implications of their presence on understandings of these cultural environments have been critically neglected by scholars. One exception is a piece by musicologist Ken McLeod, who finds a direct connection between vaporwave's use of East Asian visual references and techno-Orientalism,[4] a term that describes how paranoia around Japanese economic expansion in the late twentieth century manifested in American and European cultural products.[5] For McLeod, the prevalence of these elements elicits notions of Japan's technology-driven prosperity and fosters stereotypical ideas about the country as a land of consumerism and robotics.[6] Through a qualitative analysis of its texts and paratexts, this essay extends McLeod's observations to show how vaporwave reimagines techno-Orientalism by tapping into feelings of pleasure associated with nostalgic East Asian consumer culture, primarily through its evocation of gender-based stereotypes. Moreover, it will elaborate upon the anonymous nature of the vaporwave scene that McLeod recognizes to complicate approaches to techno-Orientalist analyses of digital artifacts. In doing so, this essay contributes to the growing body of scholarly literature addressing the roles of representation, aesthetics, and affect play in the formation of communities around music genres online.[7]

Vaporwave: Music for the Extremely Online

Equal parts music genre and Internet meme, vaporwave was born in the early 2010s from equally eclectic microgenres like chillwave and witch house.[8] While the genre contains a great deal of musical variety, including numerous offshoots like mallsoft and vaportrap, the general formula for a vaporwave track remains as Andrew Whelan and Raphaël Nowak describe it: the "slowing down and looping [of] ostensibly 'kitsch' or 'schmaltzy' music from the 1980s and 1990s" like corporate Muzak and R&B.[9] Enhancing the kitsch are vaporwave's eclectic visual aspects, which are considered equally as important as the music in characterizing this genre: screenshots from obscure 1990s anime series, footage of abandoned malls, or old logos from software like Windows 95 and gaming companies like Atari serve to design the world of imagined consumer nostalgia that surrounds this music. Since its emergence, vaporwave has seeped into mainstream culture in various ways, including through a collaboration between Arizona Tea and Adidas to produce

sneakers covered with the iconic turquoise-and-cherry blossom print which provided aesthetic inspiration for vaportrap artist Yung Lean's 2013 music video "Hurt." The sensation and subsequent mob resulting from the pop-up release of the sneakers in Lower Manhattan led to the intervention of the NYPD.[10]

Yung Lean's 2013 music video for *Hurt*, which employs vaporwave-inspired aesthetics. This video is included in the playlist on the bottom right of this page.

Vaporwave's reliance on digital spaces for its birth and its continued evolution, resulting in its characterization as an "Internet genre," holds implications for questions around identity and representation in this music.[11] Harper describes "digital maximalism," the sense of information overload or saturation that is embodied in the very essence of the Internet, as one characteristic of Internet genres like vaporwave. Indeed, vaporwave seems to capture the excitement and anxiety of being extremely online. Even in its early to mid-2010s heyday, live vaporwave shows or physical album releases were rare, and vaporwave fans who wanted to participate in the genre did so primarily through engagement in online spaces.[12] By sharing vaporwave tracks through Tumblr and Bandcamp pages and websites for small net-based music labels, listeners and creators alike create musical imagined communities and simultaneously facilitate further participation in online activities around the genre through the promotion of vaporwave's aesthetic. At the same time, vaporwave's online and DIY nature lead to a blurring of lines between creator and listener and the formation of a largely anonymous community, which necessitates a reexamination of the traditional lenses of power dynamics through which many analyses of cultural appropriation are conducted, given that the identities of producers are often not easily identifiable.

As Whelan and Nowak observe, "vaporwave is used as a vehicle to invoke and narrate capitalism," and "a particular construction of capitalism is thereby communicated to those who engage with these accounts" of the genre.[13] One of the most common tools for this construction is nostalgia, which is key to vaporwave's affective power: it offers digital "archaism within a contemporary frame," harkening back to the earliest days of the Internet both musically and aesthetically.[14] Feelings of nostalgia are also central to vaporwave's evocation of East Asian consumer culture. Alican Koc argues that the use of Japanese text and anime characters, coupled with representations of consumer commodities such as cans of Arizona green tea adorned with cherry blossoms, is characteristic of a "melancholic nostalgia . . . created through an aestheticization of the feelings of estrangement produced by the salient characteristics of late capitalism."[15] At the same time, such uses of nostalgic elements can also elicit feelings of pleasure in the listener, or what Glitsos refers to as vaporwave's "memory play."[16] This essay considers these nostalgic pleasures as one way in which vaporwave expands how techno-Orientalism can be conceived of aesthetically, in contrast with the futuristic grit of classic cyberpunk texts such as *Blade Runner*.

Imagining Asian Futures: Tracing the Evolution of Techno-Orientalism

While Edward Said addressed how Europe has historically treated representations of Islam in its art and literature in *Orientalism*, his idea that Orientalist thought is informed by paranoia was hugely influential in the development of techno-Orientalism.[17] In *Spaces of Identity*, David Morley and Kevin Robins define techno-Orientalism as a cultural manifestation of Western fears and anxieties surrounding Japan's technological and economic developments in the late twentieth century.[18] Europe and North America perceived the country's modernity as conflicting with Western modernity, and techno-Orientalism was used to bring Japan back into the schema of self-versus-Other through a "manic assertion of difference." Japan was portrayed in Western cultural products "as the figure of empty and dehumanised technological power," home to "unfeeling aliens . . . cyborgs and replicants."[19] Techno-Orientalism has been observed most visibly in science fiction or "cyberpunk" texts such as William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, Joss Whedon's television series *Firefly*, and the often-cited *Blade Runner* franchise. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu characterize the worlds built in these texts, imbued with darkness and grunge, "as contradictory spaces of futuristic innovation and ancient mystique."[20] Vaporwave similarly mashes up Japanese technological artifacts with images of abandoned malls, and futuristic cyberscapes with retro color palettes, seeming to portend, or at least comment upon, a vision of the future defined by techno-Orientalist anxieties around hyper-consumerism, conformity, and dependence on technology.

Much work has been done to develop these ideas since the height of the "Japan panic" in the 1990s, which does more to acknowledge the autonomy of the participants on both sides in processes of appropriation and adaptation.[21] While Orientalism suspends Asia in a "traditional, and often premodern imagery," for Roh, Huang, and Niu, techno-Orientalism "presents a broader, dynamic, and often contradictory spectrum of images, constructed by the East and West alike, of an 'Orient' undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformations."[22] Fabienne Darling-Wolf's reading of Japan's history of cultural exchange with Europe and the resulting influence on European art and intellectual movements follows this point. She argues that previous examinations of European Orientalism have downplayed Japan's framed the island's soft power as a mere respite from America's cultural dominance, and have downplayed Japan's active role in facilitating these cultural exchanges.[23] While the frequent anonymity of both producers and consumers in vaporwave renders it difficult to trace and analyze the geographical directions of these exchanges, the sense of placelessness this fosters also allows for a detachment from binary notions of cultural relationships or one-directional media flows, and for a view similar to Darling-Wolf's of the techno-Orientalism in vaporwave as a result of a complex amalgamation of global influences.

Representations of gender and sexuality in techno-Orientalist texts nevertheless continue to perpetuate what Minjeong Kim and Angie Y. Chung describe as "the notion of the Orient as the culturally-inferior" Other, which converges with "the concept of women as the gender-inferior Other." These notions of inferiority represent "White men's heterosexual desire for (Oriental) women and for Eastern territories through the feminization of the Orient," played out through portrayals of Asian women in Western media as sensual and subservient.[24] For Kathryn Allan, the "techno-Orientalized female" is rendered in texts that reinforce these stereotypes as "as a body who enacts her (limited) agency for the benefit of the white male user," not a character possessing agency but a "part of the exotic backdrop in some Westernized cyber-fantasy."[25] Moreover, in techno-Orientalist texts, location is typically obscured in favor of what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun describes as the "dispersal of global capitalism and networks" via cyberspace, which "allows one to conquer a vaguely threatening Oriental landscape" through exotic, and often erotic, fantasies.[26] Allan recognizes the potential for resistance to these "traditional" usages of the female body in feminist post-cyberpunk texts, necessitating close attention to how these bodies are represented, and potentially exploited, in more recent cultural trends with techno-Orientalist elements.[27]

While other scholars who have written about vaporwave discuss the use of East Asian characters and imagery as simply a reinforcement of the genre's other defining characteristics, McLeod's reading takes this observation a step further, discussing how the nature of the vaporwave scene as a space within which anyone can occupy a different

identity makes it vulnerable to acts of techno-Orientalist appropriation.[28] What he leaves open to questioning is how vaporwave's status as an Internet genre necessitates a reexamination of techno-Orientalist themes in musical paratexts that are often static images, brief video clips, or visual mash-ups of other media texts spread through largely anonymous digital flows. Moreover, while McLeod acknowledges vaporwave's parodic references to the soft power effect that has made Japanese and Korean youth culture so popular among Western consumers, the lack of critical acknowledgement of the genre's reinforcement of "racially reductive tropes" within what is otherwise a highly self-aware musical community goes unacknowledged.[29]

Where are We Now?: Location and Power in Vaporwave's Techno-Orientalism

<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Figure-1-Lucy-March.jpg>

Figure 1. Cover image for XWave's 2016 album *Vaporwave for China*.

Scholars of vaporwave have recognized the power of the online spaces where vaporwave is produced, transmitted, and criticized in reinforcing its musical and aesthetic characteristics.[30] Through engagement with vaporwave on platforms like Reddit, YouTube, and Bandcamp, producers and fans are invited through digital communities to make sense of the perils of capitalism through the lens of the genre. At the same time, the nebulous relationships between people and places fostered by the Internet have led to the widespread co-option of global cultural relics for entertainment purposes.[31] Grafton Tanner compares vaporwave to other online phenomena that have sought to unsettle through

distortions of pop culture relics, from the horror film *Cabin in the Woods* to the bizarre video mashup genre YouTube Poops (YTPs). Vaporwave similarly plays with retro images of East Asian culture to elicit a sense of consumerist nostalgia, while maintaining the sense of placelessness that surrounds the genre through the mixing of these elements with cultural artifacts that are difficult to code geographically.[32]

Indeed, locating vaporwave geographically has been a problem that other scholars have grappled with, with varying degrees of success. Tanner seems to contradict himself in this respect, at one point asserting that vaporwave is not situated in any particular time nor place, and later arguing that most vaporwave albums are set in a "Western capitalistic society."[33] McLeod correctly observes that some vaporwave producers are located in Asia, though many of the genre's major labels, including Dream Catalogue, Business Casual, and the now-defunct Beer on the Rug are based in the United States or Europe.[34] However, most vaporwave artists have no real public persona, as most conceal their identities behind aliases often "referencing an invented jargon of dystopic corporate or commercially related business names" or incorporating an often nonsensical jumble of Japanese or Korean characters.[35] The lack of live performances even at the height of the genre's popularity reinforces this sense of anonymity. That anonymity renders the notion of techno-Orientalist co-option in vaporwave, in the traditional sense of the "West" appropriating the "East," far less useful.

Further complicating matters, vaporwave is based just as much in imaginative notions of Western culture, demonstrated by the use of Greek columns, busts, and other such elements in its paratexts. Examples of vaporwave subgenres like "Simpsonwave" in which tracks using distorted samples from the iconic television show are played over clips from the Simpson's earlier episodes (the seasons that aired in the 1990s are widely considered to be the show's strongest) demonstrates that American pop culture nostalgia also occupies a prominent position in vaporwave's cultural mélange.[36] These fusions of cultural elements lead to a sort of "hyper hybrid" text that scholars struggle to place into a particular cultural category. Adam Trainer advises that this type of text is symptomatic of digital technologies which allow for the mining and reuse of information, and "the confluence of texts from various points on the spectrum of cultural production, which can now be merged to create entirely new hybrid texts."[37] Moreover, this emphasis on reproduction in vaporwave, which allows potential producers to easily apply vaporwave's aesthetic "formula" to a theme of their choosing, leads to the creation of often nonsensical and parodic cultural representations that imply a sense of ironic self-awareness on the part of the creator.

This tendency toward irony, parody, and ambivalence in vaporwave is often cited by commentators as a way of "telling the genre" which, as Whelan and Nowak describe, can

simultaneously act as a "getaway vehicle" in the context of critical conversations around the music.[38] McLeod cites the example of a vaporwave offshoot known as Trumpwave, which uses image of the former US President set against typically vaporwave settings and is strongly associated with the alt-right movement, to show how the genre as a memetic form can nevertheless be appropriated in harmful ways under the guise of satire.[39] Similarly dark examples of cultural co-option, though less common, can also be seen in vaporwave's references to East Asia. Examples of vaporwave texts like Missouri-based Lush Crayon's 2020 album *CoronaWave*, which includes tracks like "W U H A N" and "Quarantine or Die, Scum," bring to mind the problematic discourses around China's role in the global coronavirus pandemic, which led to a sharp increase in incidents of violence and harassment towards Asian Americans. In 2016, vaporwave artist pepsiman (stylized in Japanese as | ペプシマン|) released an album on Bandcamp titled "9/11," featuring a cover with an image of the twin towers and track titles such as "Al-Qaeda" and "Taliban Nights." On their Bandcamp page, pepsiman encouraged their followers to "celebrate the 15th anniversary [of 9/11]" by purchasing a limited release of the album on cassette.[40] Despite their presentation as satirical texts, these examples nevertheless bring to mind the tendency of center nations like the US to engage in Othering as a means to make sense of national tragedies or even global pandemics.

As the above examples demonstrate, the anonymous and locationless nature of digital vaporwave, the often hybrid nature of its paratexts, and its ironic packaging do not mitigate the potential harm that cultural representations within this genre can cause. Therefore, instances of cultural stereotyping occurring within the vaporwave subculture must be examined with broader considerations of context and power dynamics. As Darling-Wolf argues in a reflection on the terrorist attack of the French satirical newspaper in response to their printing an image of Muhammad, "regardless of their creator's intentions, *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoons must be considered in relationship to the long history of Orientalist visual representations of the 'Other' throughout the French media."[41] At the same time, the anonymous nature of the scene and ambiguous cultural contexts for many vaporwave works can potentially obscure both creator intentions and the local/global dynamics at play in these representations. Critical analyses of vaporwave must nevertheless consider how these texts are, as Kim and Chung put it, "perpetuating Orientalist meanings that reaffirm the dominant status" of whiteness for a global audience. In the case of an Internet genre like vaporwave that has achieved considerable cultural and even commercial success through online music marketplaces like Discogs, such representations have the tendency to encourage "neither identification with nor education about Asian cultures, but . . . commodification and 'objectification,'" and in some cases even villainization.[42] Examining the various ways in which cultural elements are used and fused together in vaporwave is key to understanding how these fusions could be interpreted or further co-opted in problematic ways.

Sources of Pleasure: Nostalgia and Gender in Vaporwave

YouTube upload of 식료품groceries's 2014 album 슈퍼마켓*Yes! We're Open*.

Scholars of vaporwave have tended to focus on the unsettling ways in which the genre's paratexts remind the viewer of the consequences of late capitalism and technological dominance. A key concept introduced by Tanner in relation to vaporwave is philosopher Jacques Derrida's hauntology, an "update to postmodernism's critique of history" which shifts the focus to a future we feel we have already lost—in this case, that which capitalism promised in the past but has not come to fruition.[43] There is room to consider vaporwave's use of East Asian text and imagery in Tanner's reading of hauntology as it makes sense of the capitalist elements in vaporwave: it puts on visual display memories of an economically prosperous period in Japanese history during the 1980s and 1990s, one that ultimately failed to deliver on the promises of global capitalism and instead resulted in a "lost decade" of economic stagnation.[44] At the same time, vaporwave's often bright and cheery visuals present a strong contrast to more widely understood notions of techno-Orientalist texts in the *Blade Runner* camp, and the dreary futures they envision. An analysis of the use of East Asia cultural imagery in vaporwave reveals very different forces at play than a sense of dread about a capitalist future, and rather than haunting the viewer, it invites them to come along for the ride.

Vaporwave's use of East Asian elements easily lend themselves to the notions of pleasure: Ross Cole finds "unexpected pleasure latent in vaporwave's playful remediations" with

advertising and popular culture of a bygone era.<u>45</u> Indeed, Chun's theorization of the Internet as a "vacation space, in which responsibility is temporarily suspended in favor of self-indulgence" makes it the perfect home for the genre.<u>46</u> However, the pleasure-evoking imagery in vaporwave is markedly different from Chun's cyberpunk examples from Japanese and American media: contrast the cyborg pin-up aesthetic of The Major in Mamoru Oshii's *Ghost in the Shell* with a disembodied hand holding a Fiji water bottle, or a perfectly coiffed model in a 1980s Pocari Sweat advertisement. Vaporwave's visual narratives depict leisurely (though arguably spiritually unfulfilling) activities afforded by life spent embracing capitalism, such as playing video games, eating at a fast-food restaurant, or driving your Pontiac down a palm-tree lined highway. As Harper suggests, all of these paratextual characteristics contribute to "the suggestion that the release was produced by some corporation as mood music for a lifestyle of business, shopping or luxurious downtime."<u>47</u> Vaporwave consumption offers the same potential benefits of pleasure for the viewer as the texts considered in Chun's treatment of high-tech Orientalism, but in a bright, nostalgic package.

<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Figure-2-Lucy-March-1.jpg>

Figure 2. Cover art for vaporwave mix uploaded to YouTube.

Laura Glitsos's work is key for understanding how feelings of nostalgia for East Asian popular culture, both real and invented, function as pleasure in vaporwave. While her analysis also brings in the unsettling aspects of the vaporwave listening experience, she finds that "the pleasure of vaporwave is . . . understood as a pleasure of remembering for the sake of the act of remembering itself<u>48</u> In one example, she quotes a Reddit user for whom vaporwave brings to mind memories of his childhood in Okinawa, and the music he

enjoyed listening to at that time in his life. Vaporwave listening need not bring to mind memories of one's direct experiences with a certain time or place, however: "memory is 'crowd-sourced' to and from the vaporwave aesthetic" and therefore "memory is only another commodifiable object . . . which produces this sense of nostalgia for something that may or may not 'belong' to any particular past."[49] Uses of images from older anime series in vaporwave contribute to this sense of detached nostalgia, even for those listeners who may not have witnessed the "Cool Japan" marketing strategy at its height. Herb L. Fondevilla's analysis of mass media in the Philippines between 2006 and 2014 similarly demonstrates how a generation that grew up consuming Japanese media incorporated these influences into their own country's sense of nostalgia through media production.[50] The same argument could certainly be made for the vaporwave community that, as Born and Haworth observe, appears to be on its surface "squarely Anglo-American."[51] In this case, the enduring global influence of "Cool Japan" and, increasingly, Korean popular culture ensures that the uses of these nostalgic elements hold some familiarity with the viewer, or may even bring to mind fond memories of one's own engagement with these cultural texts. However, a closer look at the pleasurable imagery in vaporwave reveals the potentially insidious consequences of vaporwave's representations of Asian bodies when viewed through the lenses of Orientalism and gender.

Histories of Orientalist representations (including techno-Orientalism and self-Orientalism) have often served as a means to fulfill Western desires to view self-affirming portrayals of the exoticized Asian woman.[52] Ellie Hisama identifies the social assumptions about Asian women that allow for these sorts of depictions in American popular music: the passive and subservient role they take on in romantic relationships (particularly with Western men), their unique brand of innocent sexuality, or the role placed upon them as objects representing a monolithic Asian culture.[53] Asian or Asian-coded women similarly serve as 2-D vessels for consumerist pleasure in vaporwave paratexts in such a way that reinforces these stereotypes. Footage used in vaporwave mixes will often feature clips from 1980s and 1990s commercials for Japanese consumer products, which largely make use of female models, to help advertise everything from cars to beverages. Whether dressed casually or in professional attire, these women almost always have a clean and conservative appearance. Through their participation in many of the activities typically depicted in vaporwave paratexts, such as shopping, vacationing in a tropical paradise, or enjoying a Coca-Cola while playing in a fountain, these women invite the viewer to participate in nostalgic capitalist pleasures.

Figure 3. Cover image for Leisure Center's 2016 album *High Fashion*.

Lisa Nakamura finds that the attractions in online representations of Asian bodies "lie not only in being able to 'go' to exotic places, but to co-opt the exotic and attach it to oneself. The appropriation of racial identity becomes a form of recreation, a vacation from fixed identities and locales."[54] In addition to their promotion of consumer-oriented activities, idiosyncratic edits such as partially or completely obscuring the faces of female models in vaporwave allow for this co-option of the "exotic," while simultaneously transforming these figures into pleasurable props for these musical commodities. Popular vaporwave artists often employ these visual strategies on the limited physical copies of albums that serve to generate hype about new releases. For example, the cover of 猫 シ Corp's *Palm Mall Mars*, the second in a series of influential albums that served to define the vaporwave subgenre mallsoft, features an edited photo of a dark-haired woman dressed in kimono gazing away from the viewer and up at an escalator. Artist telepath テレパシー能力者, whose physical releases can command hundreds of dollars on Discogs, frequently employs such images in

his work: a collaborative album with telepath and Silver Richards features bright neon colors and geometric shapes on its cover that contrast with the blurred-out face of the dark-haired woman facing the viewer (Figure 4). The erasure of these women's identities is reminiscent of Chun's reading of cyberpunk texts like *Neuromancer*, where in the experience of browsing Orientalist cyberspace, "there are those who can reason online and those who are reduced to information."[55]

The use of images of female anime characters plays a similar role of facilitating pleasure in vaporwave. Anime women are frequently portrayed in vaporwave's paratexts similarly engaging in leisure activities like relaxing on the beach or simply looking cute for the viewer. While not immediately problematic, the characterization in vaporwave of the anime girl as emblematic of the nostalgic idea of "Cool Japan" could serve to reinforce stereotypes around *otaku* culture as an "adhesion to an infantilized and feminized consumer lifestyle."[56] Left unchecked, representations of young animated women in musical paratexts can enter a moral gray area: for example, Pharrell Williams's 2014 music video "It Girl" which uses an animation sequence featuring of childlike (known popularly as *moé*) girls designed by Takashi Murakami's protégé Iwamoto Masakatsu and produced by Japanese company Kaikai Kiki, garnered criticism for accompanying images of these girls with lyrics like "When you bite on my lip / And hold my hand, and moan again / I'm a hold that ass." In her analysis of "It Girl," Sousa reveals the problematic potential in such instances of cultural mixing in music even when there is a diverse cast of producers involved in a project.[57] While vaporwave's representations of women are almost never overtly sexual, the use of both "real" and anime women as a means to evoke nostalgia for the cultural productions of "Cool Japan" serve as a continuation of the objectification and commercialization of female bodies in Orientalist representations.

Figure 4. Cover image for ｔｅｌｅｐａｔｈ テレパシー能力者 And Silver Richards' 2013 album 夜遊.
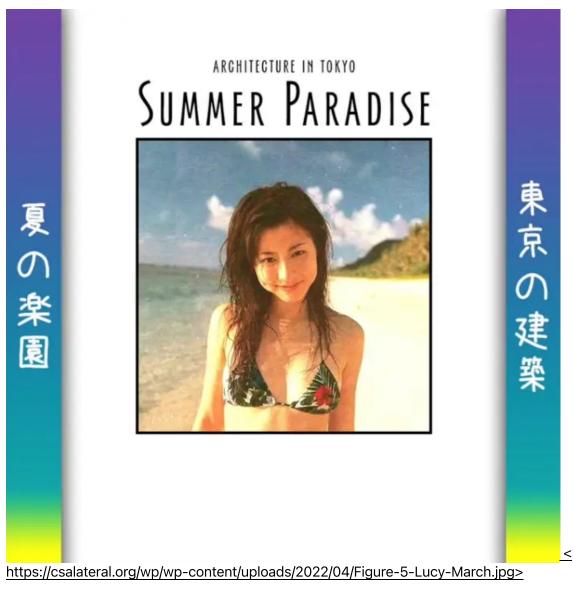
As Whelan and Nowak observe with regard to the genre work around vaporwave, "the relation between written description and dialogue and the genre is especially consequential in the online contexts where" vaporwave music circulates.[58] Initial observations of these contexts indicate a lack of critical reflection on the genre's representations of racial or gender identities within the vaporwave community. In one post on r/vaporwave, a Reddit user reluctantly wonders about the potential for Asian fetishism in the genre's visual elements, assuring readers that they are not trying to "stir outrage" or be a "triggered [Social Justice Warrior]." Subsequent responses questioning the observation prompted this user to add an edit to their original post: "If I am wrong, would you mind explaining why instead of brushing me off?"[59] A 2015 post on the subreddit r/asianamerican, simply titled "Is vaporwave racist?" garnered a wider range of responses, from irritation ("No lmfao") to ambivalence ("I don't see any reason to take offense if none was ever meant to be given")
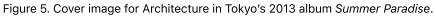
to an essay-length response that ultimately concludes "Maybe. But Vaporwave is definitely Orientalist."[60]

Shedding additional light on this complex dynamic in the vaporwave scene is a Reddit post by well-known female vaporwave artist Luxury Elite. In what is commonly referred to as an AMA post, in which the author encourages her fans to "ask me anything," she responds to a user who asks how she feels about the "near complete lack of females in the vaporwave genre":

I've never really felt any sort of way about being stuck in a boys club, I guess because everybody in it I already knew outside of it and they were all friends of mine and very encouraging of me doing the Lux project. Plus, there are more women than you'd think! Some just don't explicitly say it, but I'd say I know about . . . 10 or so? I'm sure there are more out there I don't know about, either. But I've had a lot of women send me Soundcloud and Facebook messages thanking me for being a woman in music and inspiring them to do music themselves so that's rewarding to me.[61]

While pointing out that being a female producer in a largely male genre has given her the opportunity to inspire other women to pursue their own music careers, Luxury Elite does not explore the potential implications of her characterization of vaporwave as a "boy's club" or the observation that the female producers she knows of have not publicly revealed their gender identity (likely because, as the response implies, her own experiences in the scene have been positive). While additional research and observations are needed to gauge how audiences respond to racial and gender representations in vaporwave, these examples point toward a lack of critical reflection in the community that could encourage the silencing or Othering of marginalized identities within the scene.

Figure 5. Cover image for Architecture in Tokyo's 2013 album *Summer Paradise*.

Concluding Remarks

A qualitative analysis of vaporwave presented in this article finds that while the presence of East Asian cultural elements in the genre's paratexts can complicate outdated notions of cultural flows that have tended to guide analyses of techno-Orientalism, they can still serve to reinforce certain Orientalist stereotypes, particularly with regard to the genre's depictions of women as a means to evoke consumerist pleasure. The use of Korean and Chinese cultural elements and text in the genre's paratexts also requires an analysis of vaporwave's brand of techno-Orientalism beyond the Japan-US cultural relationship, with consideration to how such imagery "subsumes all of East Asia into a single universalizing entity."[62] The anonymity inherent in the production and sharing of online musical genres requires a rethinking of how scholars approach themes like techno-Orientalism to expand the analysis beyond outdated conceptions of power dynamics. Finally, initial observations

of the audience and producer dialogue around representations of diverse racial and gender identities in vaporwave finds that a lack of critical examinations of those representations in the community could allow for the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes around those identities.

In his piece, McLeod quotes the well-known vaporwave producer Ramona Xavier (who goes by the artistic pseudonym Vektroid) describing her 2012 album *Sapporo Contemporary* as a "a parody of American hyper contextualization of e-Asia circa 1995" to argue that through satirizing Japan and Korea's processes of self-Orientalizing, Xavier is effectively reinforcing the positive notions of East Asian popular culture among American consumers that Japan played an active role in building, and even serves to weaken the "previously negative techno-Orientalist stereotypes that globally influential Western sci-fi movies and literature had helped formulate."[63] Vaporwave's aesthetic undoubtedly brings to mind Japan's soft power at its apex, and certainly some elements might serve as an expression of admiration in particular contexts, sometimes to rather extreme lengths (for example, though no longer active, coolmemoryz was a Floridian vaporwave producer who pretended to be from Japan[64]). Even in a satirical framing, however, uses and reproductions of East Asia cultural elements in vaporwave can still serve to reinforce harmful stereotypes consistent with histories of Orientalist representations, such as the objectification of Asian women enforced by vaporwave's play with pleasurable aesthetics.

A possible alternative reading of vaporware's use of gendered imagery might be suggested by Toshiya Ueno's work on the position of women in science fiction and rave music, which emphasizes the agency of the depicted subjects.[65] Given the dearth of Asian voices in the scholarly literature on this genre, however, one can only hypothesize if such a perspective would be equally productive with consideration to vaporwave. These issues of representation in vaporwave are all the more relevant given the increasing popularity of online genres such as lo-fi hip-hop, whose producers and curators make similar use of Japanese cultural imagery to build these genres' aesthetics. Vaporwave even continues to inspire trends in mainstream popular music and culture: a designer who worked with Ariana Grande for her "7 rings" music video cites "the popular internet aesthetic of vaporwave culture, a movement that evokes the neon colors of 80's and 90's pop culture as well as the style of early internet graphic design" as the inspiration for the video's title graphic.[66] Vaporwave may be "dead," but its cultural reverberations continue to echo through online musical spaces, making their way into our imaginations and forming new memories of pasts that may never have occurred and futures that may never come to pass. Observers should pay careful attention to these reverberations and the potential that they hold to exclude or harm.

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